



# Banding Marathon

## STATE PART OF THREE-YEAR MOURNING DOVE BANDING STUDY

By Ron Wilson

The mourning dove's doleful *coo-ah, coo, coo, coo* call and whistling wings are unmistakable. Without even looking skyward for proof, we can accurately pin these sounds to the gray-brown birds.

As obvious as these traits are, the dove's nurturing and nest-building quirks are as equally obscure. When fashioning a nest – a poorly-built structure as far as nests go – the male retrieves sticks and passes them to the female while, get this, standing on her back. Mourning doves also feed their young crop milk, or “pigeon milk,” a whitish substance secreted by the adults. Both male and female regurgitate the highly nutritious food that

harbors more protein than cow or human milk.

These unusual mourning dove characteristics are not lost on biologists. Even so, scientists want to learn more about this species that is hugely popular with hunters, especially in states south of here.

### Three-year Study

In a three-year study, where more than 85,000 mourning doves will be trapped and banded in North Dakota and 25 other states, biologists hope to determine harvest rates, estimate annual survival, provide information on geographic distribution of harvest,

and develop and refine techniques for future banding.

The banding project started in 2003, but North Dakota Game and Fish Department biologists also banded some birds in 2002. In 2003, 758 doves trapped in the state were fitted with small leg bands. In 2004, the number jumped to 1,294 birds, which was more than needed, but biologists were encouraged to band as many doves as possible. “The biggest part of the project is updating our data and improving population models, which enable scientists to make better harvest management decisions,” said Mike Szymanski, Game and Fish Department migratory game bird biologist, who is leading the banding project for the state.

Mourning doves are the most numerous migratory game bird in North America and more doves are harvested by hunters than all other migratory game birds combined. “Dove hunting is serious stuff in dozens of other states,” Szymanski said. “In 2003, for example, the No. 1 dove harvest state was Texas, where they harvested 3.9 million birds.”

In North Dakota, mourning doves aren't revered like they are in Texas. In 2003, only about 35,000 doves were shot in the state. “People in North Dakota don't often recognize doves as viable targets because they are so small,” Szymanski said. “Plus, a good portion of the birds leave the state before the September 1 season opener.”



*The map shows where mourning doves banded in North Dakota have been harvested.*

North Dakota held its first mourning dove season in 1963, and another followed in 1964. But after two years, and after only a small taste of hunting these sporting birds, state lawmakers voted to kill dove hunting. Efforts to restore a dove season continued over the years, and in 1979 hunters got their wish. Dove season has remained open ever since. "I take dove hunting pretty seriously," Szymanski said. "I love hunting them; they're a challenge and a pretty tasty bird."

Szymanski said the hunter can employ a number of techniques in pursuit of mourning doves. "You can walk and shoot them out of tree rows or shoot them out of harvested fields," he said. "Or you can employ the more traditional approach of sitting by a waterhole or a harvested field and take your shots as they pass or come straight in to drink or feed. It can be very reminiscent of waterfowl hunting."

## Band Check

Mourning dove hunters are asked to carefully check all doves for leg bands during the upcoming season opening September 1 in North Dakota.

Some doves have been fitted with metal leg bands, each inscribed with a bird identification number and a toll-free telephone number hunters can use to report the band. In return, wildlife managers will receive important information on the number of banded doves harvested and location and date of harvest.

Mourning dove bands can be reported by calling 800-327-BAND (2263); or online at [www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl](http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl). Hunters will receive a certificate of appreciation that identifies who banded the bird, age and gender of the bird, and date and location of banding.



CRAIG BIRHLE

Whether you hunt doves or not, Szymanski said it's essential to understand the importance of the pursuit in the big picture. "Dove hunters comprise the most substantial group of migratory game bird hunters," he said. "They shoot a lot of shotgun shells, spending something like \$60 to \$70 million a year for ammunition."

And with those ammunition fees come excise taxes and funding for the Pittman-Robertson Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act established in 1937, which has allowed Game and Fish and other wildlife agencies to survey wild game populations, conduct research, purchase land, develop habitat, and much more. Pittman-

Robertson funded programs, for example, helped restore giant Canada goose populations in North Dakota – from a one-time low of only 500 free-flying geese – and helped reintroduce bighorn sheep in the badlands.

## Banding Birds

Trapping and banding mourning doves, Szymanski said, is a marathon, not a sprint. When biologists band ducks, they can get upwards of 200-300 birds in a trap. With doves, it's more like two or three. "Mourning doves are pretty patient birds," he said. "They just don't go charging into a trap and start eating whatever bait you've dumped on the ground."

Still, the temptation to eat one's way into wire funnel traps is too much for some doves to overcome. On July 5, the fifth day of the trapping and banding season for biologists, Szymanski banded a number of birds caught in eight traps in the Bismarck area. Two traps, resting nearly side-by-side, held eight birds that succumbed to the lure of millet.

"We find those areas that look like they'll hold quite a few doves, places with good nesting and roosting habitat – wires and dead trees – with open areas nearby to put bait down," Szymanski said.

Birds that have nothing to do with the study, like grackles, yellow-headed black birds and the occasional pheasant, also take advantage of the free food – and the surprise short incarceration that goes along with it. The drill when a mixed bag of birds is caught in a trap is to first carefully capture by hand the mourning doves and place them in a mesh bag. The top of the cage is then left open to let the interlopers fly free.

Mourning doves are banded in the front seat of Szymanski's pickup, with the air conditioning turned up. The cooler conditions, during what must be somewhat of a stressful situation for the captured, are best for the health of the birds. And, Szymanski joked, he likes it better, too.

The metal bands, fitted to the doves' legs with needle-nose pliers, are tiny. Four bands could easily fit on the head of a penny. Their diminutive size is why wildlife managers continue to remind dove hunters to check harvested birds carefully for bands before cleaning and discarding the remains.

Before releasing the birds, biologists record the age and sex of the birds. Determining the difference between the two sexes is easy once Szymanski points out the bluish sheen on the top of the adult male's head, which is missing on the female. On young-of-the-year



CRAIG BHRLE



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*The bands attached to mourning dove legs as part of a study are tiny. More than one band can easily fit on the head of a penny. Not all of the doves banded by Mike Szymanski, Game and Fish Department migratory game bird biologist, were in a hurry to leave the comfort of the air-conditioned vehicle.*

birds, the colored sheen is absent, making it impossible to determine sex just by looking at the bird.

Mourning doves nest from April through September, and raise multiple clutches of young during the nesting season in North Dakota. In warmer climates, they can pull off five or six clutches. The typical clutch is two white eggs, with an incubation period of 13-15 days. Young are in the nest from 12-15 days before they are able to fly.

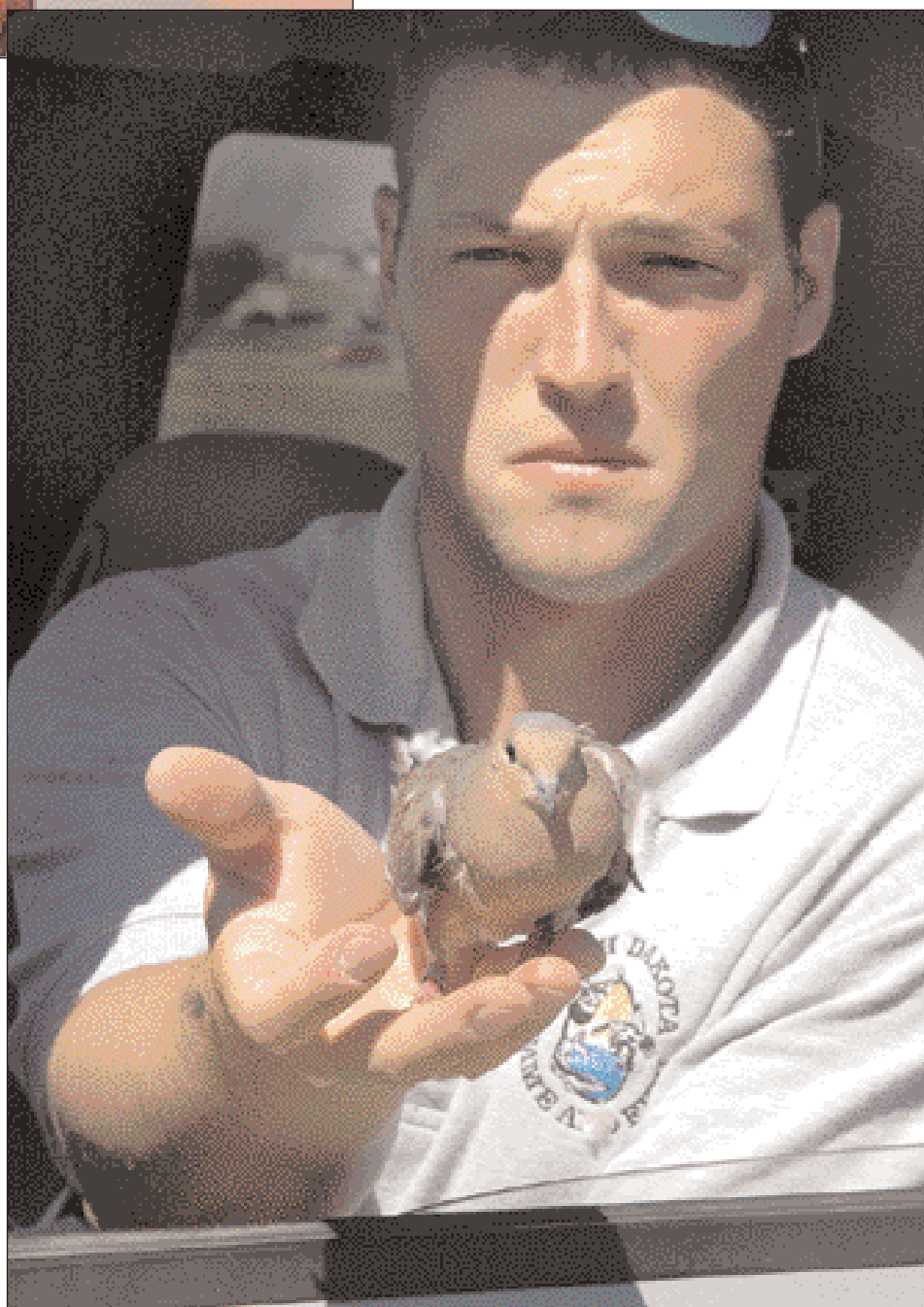
## Band Returns

It's too early in the banding study to understand what the data is telling biologists. What they do know, however, is that doves banded in North Dakota are being harvested in places like Texas, Mexico, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Georgia.

Biologists this summer have also recaptured birds banded last year in the state. If nothing else, these returns tell them the doves survived a long migration south, and a return trek north, and all the obstacles – predators, hunters, weather, and so on – the trips would entail.

With the help of hunters checking harvested doves for the tiny metal bands – and reporting their findings via the inscribed toll-free number – much more will be learned about a bird prized in many shotgunning circles.

**RON WILSON** is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.



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